

The Duke's Little Concubine

By

Viola Morne

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CHAPTER ONE

London, 1825

Sophie Flynn crumpled the eviction notice in one cold hand. "I simply need more time, Mr. Morley. I can have the rent for you by the end of next week."

Mr. Morley smiled at her, revealing several missing teeth in his upper jaw. His stout belly was scarcely contained by a waistcoat stained with the remains of his breakfast.

"My dear Mrs. Flynn, I cannot be seen to give special treatment to you, else all my tenants would be looking for extensions. If you don't have the rent, then you're out." He jerked his thumb towards the ill-fitting door.

"I don't have it."

"Well, then, perhaps we can come to another arrangement."

A sick feeling stirred in Sophie's stomach. "What do you mean?"

"A man has other needs besides money in his pocket--if you take my meaning."

"I am afraid that I do not, sir." Surely he wasn't suggesting...

"I mean, little Miss-Nose-In-The-Air, that if you give me what I want, then I'll let you stay on."

"What *do* you want, Mr. Morley?"

The scoundrel was taken aback by her plain speaking.

"A little tit-for-tat. You know."

"I assure you, I don't."

"You let old Morley dip his wick and the room is yours."

Sophie eyed him scornfully. "What a vulgar expression."

Mr. Morley flushed.

"How long would this extension last?"

"Eh?"

"If I allow you to bed me, how long could I stay?"

Morley rubbed his jaw. "Well, of course, a lot depends on how willing you are. I'd say

that two or three times a week would work out just fine."

Two or three times a week? Sophie shuddered inwardly. "May I have some time to consider your proposal?"

Morley leered at her. "How long does my fine lady need to decide? There's many a soiled dove that would leap at my proposition."

Sophie considered this highly unlikely, given her landlord's appearance and his odor of unwashed skin.

"I will let you know tomorrow."

Morley's gaze roved over her body, like a merchant examining his wares. "Until tomorrow, then."

He banged the door on his way out, and Sophie collapsed against it in relief. She had gained a reprieve until tomorrow. Heavens, there must be something she could sell! But all her jewelry, even her wedding ring, had already been pawned, along with most of her clothes and the small items of furniture she had left, once the creditors had taken their share. *Oh, Danny, how could you leave me in this fix?*

But it was no use blaming the dead. Poor Danny lay buried somewhere in Chittagong, but his debts hadn't died with him. What was she going to do? Sophie walked over to the table by the window and picked up the watercolor portrait of Danny she had painted as a wedding gift. She had managed to capture the spark of mischief in his Irish-blue eyes. Ah, what a lad he had been! She missed him acutely for a moment, before she shook herself out of her fit of melancholy.

There was no one to depend on now. Her father, the vicar, had disowned her after she had run away with Danny on that wild summer night seven years ago. Her mother had written to her faithfully each month, before she succumbed to influenza a year ago. To lose one's husband and one's mother in the space of a month! Somehow, Sophie had managed to carry on.

Her only brother was no consolation; he was just as rigid and proper as Papa. Sophie's letter of condolence to him had been returned to her unopened.

Sophie decided to return to the registry office and see if there were any new openings. She was only a giddy seventeen when she eloped and her housekeeping skills had been limited to sewing crooked seams and arranging flowers. Sophie had followed the drum with Danny after they married, which had been an eye-opening experience. She had been forced by circumstance to cope with survival, whether that meant butchering a chicken in some desolate village in the

Bengal or bargaining for food in the teeming markets of Calcutta. She had learned how to darn Danny's uniforms and how to build a fire and make a barely edible supper out of just about anything. Not that these skills were of any use in finding employment in London.

Miss Price was not encouraging as she peered over her spectacles. "Unfortunately, no new positions have come in, Mrs. Flynn. I am afraid that you are not suitable for the ones I do have on the books. Your lack of both experience and references from previous employers is to your detriment."

"Miss Price, please pardon my plain speaking, but I am desperate. I'll do anything. I'll scrub floors or wash clothes, whatever it takes."

"Well, if you are indeed in such straits, I suggest you speak with my associate, Mrs. Addison. She might be able to assist you."

"Mrs. Addison. Very good. Where can I find her?"

Miss Price scribbled on a scrap of paper and blew on it before handing it to her. "She has rooms near Covent Garden."

"Thank you, Miss Price. I am so grateful to you."

The older woman hesitated. "Just be careful, Mrs. Flynn. There are some roads that there is no turning back from. Good day."

Sophie murmured good-bye and left the registry office. She felt light-headed with relief and hope. She returned home to write a note to Mrs. Addison, begging an appointment at her earliest convenience. She ate a heel of dry bread for supper and went to bed, staring at the stains on the ceiling in the candlelight. She would find a position, she must. And, just before Sophie blew out the candle, she wondered what Miss Price had meant by her last cryptic comment. What kind of road had she referred to?

#

Sophie inspected the shabby building on a back street near Covent Garden with a dubious eye. It did not look at all respectable. Why would Mrs. Addison have rooms here? She rechecked the address on the slip of paper Miss Price had given her. No, this was the right place. Sophie pushed open the door. She followed a narrow flight of stairs to the first floor and knocked on the second door. It swung open after a moment to reveal a plump, elderly lady with a beaming smile and a spotless white cap over her gray curls.

"Mrs. Flynn? Do come in, my dear. You had no trouble finding the place?"

"None at all, Mrs. Addison. Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"Dear Miss Price never steers me wrong. There's many a young lady who has difficulty finding employment in this great city. Please, sit down. Are you hungry?"

Sophie's stomach chose that moment to gurgle dreadfully and she flushed with shame.

Mrs. Addison patted her arm. "Don't fret, my dear. I, too, have been hungry in my time. Do sit down and let me cut you a piece of cake."

In addition to cake, there were sandwiches and strong tea, liberally laced with cream and sugar. Sophie ate heartily with the encouragement of her hostess. The interior of Mrs. Addison's home was as tidy and clean as the woman herself. Why would she choose to live here?

"Feeling better, my dear?"

"Ever so much, Mrs. Addison, thank you. It was all quite delicious."

"Well, I always think better on a full stomach. Now, to business. I understand you are having difficulty finding employment?"

"I am strong and willing, but I married my husband out of the schoolroom and traveled with him on campaign until he was killed last year fighting the Burmese. I have no real work experience."

"A common problem, my dear Mrs. Flynn. I have referred many young women in your position and they have found success in their new line of work. Of course, it's not for everyone."

"What kind of employment are you referring to?"

Mrs. Addison poured them both another cup of tea. "It's rather a difficult proposition for a virtuous woman to consider, my dear Mrs. Flynn. But needs must, as you yourself have discovered. You see, I match the requirement of employers in a particular field."

Sophie swallowed nervously. "Which particular field?"

"The most exclusive brothels in London."

Sophie set down her cup. "I don't believe that I will suit, after all."

Mrs. Addison regarded her sympathetically. "My dear, I really don't think you have a choice. Unless you want to become a common whore, selling your body for pennies a tup in some sordid alley? At some point, every woman in London without an income or a family must make the choice to sell her body. You are one of the lucky ones."

"Lucky?"

"You are young and pretty and well-spoken. I am sure we can find you a place where you

can earn a great deal of money. After some years, if you are able to save, you can change your name and retire in obscurity, if you desire."

Sophie raised her hands to her hot cheeks. "What you are suggesting is wrong!"

"I am a practical woman, Mrs. Flynn, and you need to be the same. Come, would your late husband want you to end up starving in a ditch because your principles were too rigid?"

"No, but I cannot think he would want me to pursue a career as a...a..."

"A courtesan? A demi-rep? A high flyer? These are labels, Mrs. Flynn, that may describe an occupation, but do not illustrate the whole sum of any woman. You are a stranger to me and what you decide to do is completely in your own hands. I merely provide an opportunity for a woman to rise above her miserable circumstances and achieve a modicum of success."

Sophie wanted to ask her hostess if she, too, had pursued that opportunity, but modesty and good manners prevented her.

Mrs. Addison patted her hand and walked over to a desk by the window. She picked up a pen and scrawled something on a piece of paper. "This is the name and direction of the establishment that I feel you would be best suited for. If you decide to go, please mention my name. It will assist you in gaining an interview with the proprietress."

Sophie took the slip of paper. "I don't know..."

"Take some time to think about it, my dear. This particular establishment has high standards and you will be safe there. You will have a room, meals, lovely clothes, and, above all, security, should you be hired."

Sophie folded the paper and stowed it away in her reticule. She thanked Mrs. Addison and said good-bye.

"May I wish you the best of luck, Mrs. Flynn? Please let me know how you are making out."

Sophie nodded and made for the stairs, stumbling a little in the gloom. Mrs. Addison had been nothing but kind. Still, was Sophie prepared to become a...a... concubine and lose her respectability forever? That fate, unthinkable only an hour ago, now seemed a possibility. The other alternative Mrs. Addison had outlined was too terrible to contemplate. She gained the street, blinking in the sunlight, and pulled out the paper. *Mrs. Fisher, Duke Street, St. James.*

Did Sophie dare? Did she have any other choice?

#

Crispin Sinclair, the Duke of Cheverell, pulled up his horse on the hill behind his family estate, Cheverell Priory, and surveyed his domain. This ride usually left him with a strong feeling of satisfaction. Here was solid proof that Crispin was a worthy heir to his esteemed ancestors. He had come into the title as a young man of twenty-three, married, and produced two sons, ensuring the succession. Both sons were away now, Harry on a study tour of Europe and Kit at Harrow Public School. True, he was a widower, but his wife had been dead for many years and theirs had not been a love match.

So why did he feel so dissatisfied? What was it that caused this feeling of longing, at times so strong that it was visceral? Crispin admitted to himself that he felt lonely. He was not a convivial man, with few close friends. It was difficult for a man in his position to determine if someone actually wanted his company. It was more usual for someone to pursue an acquaintance with a view as to what a duke could do for him--or her. Crispin had mounted, and discarded, several mistresses over the years.

The duke had dismissed his previous mistress last fall, following a house party at Cheverell Priory that had taken an unpleasant turn. Miss Nash had drugged the ward of one of his guests, in order to get her into the duke's bed. Unaware that the girl had been dosed with an aphrodisiac, Crispin had been very pleased, until his guest discovered his ward in bed with both the duke and Miss Nash. Things had eventually been sorted out to each party's satisfaction, but Crispin had sacked Miss Nash on the spot for her reckless behavior.

Perhaps that was the problem. Crispin needed another little girl for his nursery. One he could dress in short skirts and read stories to, a sweet little woman who would obey his every command and grace his bed whenever he wanted her to. A round-bottomed girl he could punish when he had the urge. In short, a woman he could control. Crispin would make the rules and ensure they were carried out. He wouldn't allow himself to be prey to her feminine ploys, her tears and sighs. In fact, the duke enjoyed spanking a girl and if he made her cry, it was only because he was doing it right.

Crispin pondered the invitation he had received to *The Nursery's* spanking party, set for a fortnight hence. He could travel to London and inspect Mrs. Fisher's latest wares. It would be a respite from boredom, if nothing else. Having his own girl was so much trouble. He could spend the evening agreeably entertained, without exerting himself too much and without making a commitment.

After all, to be alone was part and parcel of occupying such a lofty position, as his father had told him over and over again. Crispin was taught to hold himself apart from his peers and above the rest. He should have come to terms with it by now. He was a duke and a duke was a man alone, a man superior to those around him. And if a duke was also a man who found his bed cold and lonely, well, he could always marry again--though the thought of that made Crispin shudder. Once was enough for one lifetime.

No, Crispin would go to London and allow himself to be entertained. And if the weaker, more vulnerable part of himself longed for a woman to love, a woman who would love him with all her heart and soul, well, then he would squash those tender feelings, as his father and his tutors and his classmates at Harrow had ridiculed and squashed them. Crispin would carry on, as his father and grandfather had before him. He was the heir to a magnificent heritage--no matter that today it tasted like ashes in his mouth.

#

Sophie lingered on her walk home, stopping off in Green Park to consider her options. The June day was sunny and pleasant. Her attic room near the Westminster Bridge stairs in Southwark would be hot and stuffy.

A large spotted dog raced across the grass in front of her, his leash trailing behind him. As Sophie watched, the dog veered suddenly to one side, knocking over an elderly gentleman, who spun around and fell in an awkward heap.

Sophie ran over to the gentleman. "Sir, are you injured?"

He struggled to sit up. "Just had the wind knocked out of me. My stick?"

Sophie glanced around and fetched the polished cane. "Allow me to assist you, sir." She held onto his elbow and heaved him to his feet. "Are you unaccompanied?"

"I told the coachman to take a drive around the park. I wanted to sit and enjoy the sunshine. And then that blasted dog ran right in my path, my cane went flying, and I ended up as you found me." His hat had been knocked askew and he looked pale, but the gentleman managed to summon a brave smile. "If you would assist me over to that bench, I shall do very well."

Sophie helped him to sit down and adjusted his hat.

"Lord Aynesworth?"

A tall man approached them, exquisitely dressed, and leading a chestnut horse. He bowed slightly. "May I be of assistance?"

"Cheverell, much obliged, but this young lady has already come to my rescue. I collided with a dog and toppled over." He smiled at Sophie. "You are much stronger than your delicate appearance would suggest, my dear."

Sophie blushed and Mr. Cheverell looked her over coolly, quite without apology.

"The gentleman's coach is expected back shortly."

"I sent my fellow round the park." Lord Aynesworth waved a hand westward.

"Shall I retrieve him, then?"

"Most kind of you."

Mr. Cheverell led his horse, a high-stepping creature, back to the path and climbed into the saddle, handling the mettlesome creature with easy strength.

"I'll stay until your coach arrives."

"Kind of you, my dear. Do you live in town?"

"I do now. I am originally from Somerset, but spent the last few years in India with my husband."

"Was he a soldier or an East India Company man?"

"A soldier, my lord."

"You are alone? Your husband does not accompany you today?"

"Alas, I am a widow. My husband died during the Burmese attack on the garrison at Ramu."

"I beg your pardon; we have not yet been introduced. My name is Augustus Peele, Marquis of Aynesworth. May I ask your name, my dear?"

"Mrs. Daniel Flynn. Sophie."

Lord Aynesworth examined her face. "Mrs. Flynn. It is a great pleasure to make your acquaintance. Tell me about your home in Somerset."

So Sophie talked about the house she hadn't seen in seven years, the gardens and the lanes, her favorite horse, Shadow, and trying to sew around the fire with her mother while she longed to be outside. Mr. Cheverell returned, followed by his lordship's coach. Lord Aynesworth appeared drawn and his complexion had a gray tinge that Sophie didn't like.

"You shouldn't have let me drone on and on, my lord. I'm afraid I have tired you."

"Nonsense. It was a pleasure to sit here quietly and listen to your sweet voice."

"My lord!" The coachman, smartly attired in livery, dashed across the grass to assist Lord

Aynesworth to the carriage.

"I'm all right, Jones, stop fussing. My thanks, Cheverell and to you, Mrs. Flynn. You were very kind to a rather foolish old man."

The carriage door shut and Lord Aynesworth was borne away.

"May I escort you home, madam?" Mr. Cheverell asked. The words were polite, but his expression was so cold that Sophie was daunted.

"Thank you, but no. I have several errands to run."

He hesitated.

"I shall be fine, sir. I am quite used to being on my own. I neither need nor desire an escort."

Something flashed in those cold, gray eyes. "Very well. Good day, madam." He mounted his beautiful horse and rode off with a spurt of gravel. An attractive man, certainly, but too high in the instep for Sophie's taste.

#

By the time Sophie returned to her room in Southwark, it was nearly three o'clock. She needed time to think, time to consider her very limited options. Sophie turned the corner and saw Mr. Morley on the doorstep, scanning the streets. Heavens, was he looking for her? Her twenty-four reprieve would be up by supper time. Mr. Morley turned his head in her direction and Sophie ducked into a doorway. Time had run out. She waited until he was looking the other way and started walking towards the bridge again. She could at least meet with Mrs. Fisher and hear her out, even though her father had always warned her that the way to ruin began with a single step.

Duke Street appeared to be in a perfectly respectable neighborhood, close to Piccadilly and only a few blocks from St. James Square. Sophie hesitated in front of the door. Its brass work gleamed and the front step practically shone. She lifted the door knocker and let it fall. After a few seconds, the door opened and a servant dressed in a well-tailored coat looked her over.

"May I be of assistance, madam?"

Heavens, he was a lofty one.

Sophie cleared her throat nervously. "I was recommended by a Mrs. Addison to seek an appointment with Mrs. Fisher."

The man bowed his neck. "Please come in, madam. May I say whom is calling?"

"Mrs. Flynn. Mrs. Daniel Flynn."

She was ushered into a spacious hall, hung with gold silk wallpaper. An elegant chandelier was suspended near the curving stairs.

"Please wait here, Mrs. Flynn."

Sophie was shown into a small room, elegantly appointed with velvet-upholstered chairs and a small table. Vases of fresh flowers sat on the mantle. She waited for a half-hour before an older woman, attractive and smartly-dressed, came into the room, smiling.

"Mrs. Flynn! A pleasure to meet you. I am always happy to meet Mrs. Addison's friends. She has a discerning eye." Mrs. Fisher subjected her to a comprehensive scan. "Would you turn around please?"

Sophie complied, feeling awkward in her shabby frock and much-darned cloak.

"Yes, very nice. What is your given name, Mrs. Flynn?"

"Sophie, ma'am."

"Sophie. Perfect. We won't need to change it. It sounds fresh and virginal, which is just what our clients are looking for."

"Mrs. Fisher, I am a widow. I haven't been a virgin in quite some time."

Mrs. Fisher laughed. "My dear, how charming you are! There aren't any virgins in this line of work. Or, at least, not for long anyway. I refer to your air and appearance. My clients have a particular taste and my success lies in catering to that taste."

Oh, dear.

"Now, please take a seat and I'll ring for tea. We can get to know each other a little and decide together whether *The Nursery* is a good fit for you."

"*The Nursery*?"

"That is the name of this establishment. Our gentlemen callers enjoy seeing our ladies dressed up as little girls. They find it pleasing."

"How very odd."

"It is, I suppose. But once you have been in this business as long as I have, trust me, my dear, you will find very little strange after that. Now, I employ young women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-nine, for the most part. No younger, I won't have it. If you remain youthful in appearance, you might stay on for a few years after thirty. Most of my girls move on by then."

"May I ask where they move to?"

"Most retire with a cozy nest egg, some move on to other establishments, and a handful of them get married."

"Married? I am sorry, I just didn't think..."

"That a respectable man would ever marry a courtesan? It does happen, occasionally. But you mustn't set your heart on that happening or you will probably be disappointed. Success in this field requires discretion, tact, and stamina. You must cultivate the art of being pleasing. Ah, here is our tea."

Tea was served in thin cups of the finest china, accompanied by pastries decked with candied fruits and filled with whipped cream. Sophie's eyes must have widened, because Mrs. Fisher laughed softly.

"We live very well here, my dear. It is one of the perquisites of becoming an inmate of this establishment. Cream? Sugar?"

The pastry was as light as a cloud and the tea divine. Sophie could get used to eating like this, but the other thing...

She set down her cup. "May we discuss the terms of employment, Mrs. Fisher?"

Her hostess nodded approvingly. "Very good, Sophie. You must always remember that this is a business. The business of pleasure, true, but we are both here to earn our living. I think the best way for you to get an idea of your duties, should you decide to accept a position, would be to tour the house and meet the other girls." Mrs. Fisher drained her cup and stood. "Then we can discuss terms. Shall we?"

#

Mrs. Fisher showed Sophie over the ground floor. "We have a salon in addition to my office." The drawing room was hung with white silk. Gilded chairs and tables, along with several settees, were scattered about the room. A low stage was built at one end of the room.

"This is where the girls mingle with the clients. Twice a week, we have a showing and all the girls take a turn on the stage where they can be seen to best advantage. It has been quite successful, though I am considering incorporating a theme for some events."

"What would that be?"

"Each girl would be dressed as a character from a fairy or nursery tale. I believe our clients would find it most provocative. I have a Little Bo Peep already, but something similar

would suit you, Mrs. Flynn--something saucy yet sweet."

They climbed the stairs to the first floor. "The drawing room is for more intimate gatherings. We are hosting a spanking party in a fortnight."

Sophie could not have heard her hostess properly. "I beg your pardon, but did you mention a spanking party?"

Mrs. Fisher looked amused. "How very green you are, my dear Mrs. Flynn! As our clients enjoy the company of our special little girls, discipline is also a component of their particular fantasy. Naughty little girls get spanked or put in a corner--sometimes both. The men enjoy punishing their little ladies."

"Dear me," Sophie said faintly.

"Did your husband never spank you? You might be surprised at how much you like it."

"It sounds painful, rather than pleasurable."

Mrs. Fisher chuckled. "It's the mixture of the two sensations that make for a memorable experience. You will see for yourself."

"I will?"

"Yes, it will mark your introduction to our clients. I think we will need those two weeks to get you properly prepared."

"What kind of preparations will I need?"

Mrs. Fisher fixed her with a critical gaze. "You are a little too thin and your complexion has lost its bloom. You need to eat and rest. Your hair needs cutting and your eyebrows are somewhat, dare I say it, shaggy. You will need a new wardrobe." Mrs. Fisher picked up Sophie's hands and shuddered. "And a manicure. You look like you've been doing manual labor."

"Well, I was an army wife and we don't exactly sit around lolling on our laurels."

"My dear, I did not mean to give offense. All these ills can be quickly remedied. We have our hairdresser who visits every day and a seamstress. We also employ several ladies' maids to assist our girls with all their needs, including aids to beauty and maintenance."

When Sophie looked puzzled, Mrs. Fisher explained. "We remove all your body hair, my dear, so that you look quite child-like...everywhere. The first time is the most unpleasant, but I feel sure you will accustom yourself to it."

"Now," she continued, "I employ fifteen girls. The three with the most seniority have their own rooms on this floor and the rest share rooms upstairs. Each girl is responsible for

changing their bed linens after every client. Our laundry bills are exorbitant, but keeping our standards high is why *The Nursery* has proved so successful." Mrs. Fisher pointed up the stairs. "The servants sleep in the attic, except for the butler and cook who have rooms in the basement. I also keep two footmen and two maids."

Mrs. Fisher escorted Sophie to her office, a pleasant business-like compartment behind the dining room. "Now my terms are these: you will sign a one-year contract. For the length of the contract, you will receive an allowance for clothes and other incidentals. Your professional wardrobe, cosmetics, and hairdressing will be supplied by me. At the end of the year, you will receive a stipend of £500. Should you leave before the end of the contract, you will receive a proportionate amount of the stipend, assuming we part on good terms."

Sophie blinked. "Five hundred pounds!" It was a fortune, compared to what Sophie was used to.

"You will earn every penny, my dear. But it need not be unpleasant. My most successful girls learn to enjoy themselves. Their clients appreciate it and tip accordingly. Your tips are your own, at the discretion of each man you entertain. But most are generous, they can afford to be if they have the blunt to come here in the first place." Mrs. Fisher paused. "I will also require you to undergo a medical examination, to ensure that you are in good health. You will understand that."

"Of course," Sophie murmured. She was to be examined to ensure she was without disease. "What of the men who come here?"

"I do require new clients to present a medical certificate. It is most unusual and some potential clients are offended and never return. But I have found that most are reasonable, wanting to keep as clean as I make my girls. But there is always a risk in this line of work, no matter how small."

Yes, there would be. But it must be better than starving or giving herself to the likes of Mr. Morley.

"I would be pleased to accept your offer, Mrs. Fisher."

That lady beamed at her. "Excellent. I will show you to your room." She gave Sophie a shrewd look. "You may move in right away, if that suits you."

"Yes, that would suit me very well."

The next step on the road had been taken.